

Is It Time to Get Over the Color of Bermudagrass Fairways?

There are simply too many benefits to ignore with new bermudagrass cultivars, and they should be used on more fairways in the transition zone.

BY DARIN BEVARD

The past several years have provided an array of weather extremes during summers in the Mid-Atlantic region. Hot, wet weather . . . check. Hot, dry weather . . . check. You name it, we've had it. What is even more challenging is that these "summer" conditions have extended well beyond June, July, and August and into spring and fall as well. The result of these uncontrollable weather extremes has been struggling cool-season grass on fairways at many golf facilities, in spite of frequent fungicide inputs to control disease activity and long days of carefully managing water to keep the grass from declining.

Not surprising, more and more golf facilities are struggling to manage cool-season fairways in the transition zone. Maintenance budgets are still at reduced levels for many golf facilities, but golfer expectations are not. What if I told you that there is a grass that requires very limited fungicide inputs and less water compared to cool-season turfgrass, and it provides superb playing conditions throughout the prime golf season? More important, this grass thrives when summer is at its worst. Why does this matter? Because during midsummer heat stress, the fairways will be in excellent condition, which allows the staff to focus its resources and efforts on managing the most important turf area of every golf course: putting greens. Hot weather? The grass that I speak of does great. How about the dreaded combination of hot and wet conditions? Still not a problem for this grass. "Sign me up" is what most course officials and superintendents would say. In my opinion, no longer must we resort to wishing for such a grass that would cost less to



Would you be surprised to learn that this is not creeping bentgrass, but Latitude 36 bermudagrass?

maintain and perform admirably through the heat of the summer, because this grass already exists.

The USGA has long realized the benefits of developing turfgrasses that require fewer inputs, particularly water but also plant protectants and maintenance. Since 1986, the USGA has allocated more than \$1.75 million to researchers at Oklahoma State University. The results of these research efforts are new bermudagrass cultivars for the transition zone that surpass any of the cold-tolerant bermudagrass options that we have had in the past.

Mind you, this is not the thick-bladed common bermudagrass that is so difficult to control in golf course fairways and roughs and plagues landscape plantings. No, that bermudagrass is considered a weed by today's standards. These newer, improved bermudagrasses are fine-textured, winter-hardy cultivars specifically bred for golf course teeing grounds and fairways in the transition zone.

For sure, bermudagrass is not perfect, but neither is any other grass in the transition zone. Winterkill is a concern with any warm-season turf-

grass, although a major winterkill event has not been experienced in the Mid-Atlantic region for nearly 20 years. In contrast, cool-season grasses have suffered every summer, at least to some degree, despite great efforts to keep them in good condition. For bermudagrass, concentrated cart traffic during dormancy can be a problem, so traffic management is critical in late fall and winter to maintain winter playability. Spring dead spot disease may require fungicide inputs in late summer and fall, but nothing compared to summer fungicide inputs for cool-season turf-



New, winter-hardy bermudagrasses rival creeping bentgrass in appearance, fine texture, and playing quality, and they do so with fewer resources.

grasses. However, when bermudagrass is discussed as a fairway option, winterkill, traffic management, and spring dead spot are rarely mentioned. No, the biggest problem with bermudagrass is far simpler than any of these issues.

The “problem” with bermudagrass is its dormancy period in late fall and winter. In short, the grass begins to turn brown in mid- to late October and remains brown until March or early April, depending on spring temperatures. Because of this, bermudagrass is often looked upon as an inferior grass, and golf courses that have bermudagrass are viewed as inferior as well. This is a ridiculous notion. Remember, the grass is dormant, not dead. Even if it is off-color, the turf is still playable. In short, bermudagrass can provide outstanding playing conditions through the entire golf season in

the northern transition zone with fewer inputs compared to cool-season grasses.

It is time to get over the color obsession with turf and focus on the very tangible benefit of improved in-season playability. Dormant fairways are a non-issue to golfers in the southern U.S. They enjoy great winter playability, even on “brown” grass. There are many golf facilities in the northern part of the transition zone that could provide significantly better in-season playing quality while reducing expenditures on water and chemical inputs. Yet, for some, playing winter golf on off-color grass is just not acceptable, so the choice is made to battle the summer elements in hopes of keeping most of their cool-season turfgrasses alive.

I am not saying that all golf facilities in the transition zone should immedi-

ately convert their fairways to bermudagrass. Many still have the resources to successfully manage cool-season fairways, and they are willing to pay for it. However, there are equally as many golf facilities with fewer resources that continue to struggle maintaining cool-season fairways. And for these golf courses, there is another option. With bermudagrass, much better playing quality on the fairways can be achieved with less water and fewer resources. The dormant, brown color in the winter is not a good reason, in my opinion, not to take advantage of the improvements in bermudagrass breeding efforts that have yielded several new cultivars that are well adapted for the transition zone.

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